"NEITHER VILLAINS NOR HEROES": MAKING HISPANICS IN AMERICA

G. CRISTINA MORA, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2014)

How Americans of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban descent, not to mention innumerous other Central and South American immigrant groups, came to be "Hispanics", has been told many times. But it has never been told quite right. For conservative pundits, it is a story of "villains", of elite activists playing the "race card" in an era of civil rights laws and rampant identity politics, thus deflecting from—perhaps even hindering—ordinary folk becoming assimilated much like previous immigrant groups from Europe.[1] For the "race, class, gender" bunch of American sociology, it is a story of "heroes", resisting colonialism and racial oppression that have been different in kind from the lesser obstacles faced by ordinary immigrant groups of the past.[2] For Cristina Mora, true sociologist she, there are "neither villains nor heroes" (p.xiv). There is not even one central actor, be it the "state" or a "social movement". Instead, there are "relations", between a whole variety of actors, "activists", "bureaucrats", and "media", to quote from the subtitle of her work. These relations eventually engendered "Hispanics", as a result of a "classification struggle", as she says with Pierre Bourdieu (one of only two fellow-sociologists who are quoted in the main text) (p. 11).

In a clever analytical move, the unit of analysis in *Making Americans* is not groups, institutions, or social movements but "organizations" whose singular purpose is to persist and grow. These organizations—in state, civil society, and market—coexist in a "field" (it is never quite clear whether it is one or several), which the author memorably defines as "a crowded social landscape wherein stakeholders contest and refine different definitions and understandings of group categories" (p. 11). Accordingly, federal census bureaucrats facing a "legitimacy crisis"

[1] Linda Chavez, Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation. New York: Basic Books 1991.

[2] Yen Le Espiritu, Asian American Panethnicity. Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press 1993. This work is notionally on the "Asian" case, but it is fashioned as part of a larger story of "Native Americans" and "Latino Americans" as (non-European) "ethnic groups [that] have united to protest and promote their collective interests" (pp. 2-3).

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after a severe undercount of black and other minority groups in the 1970 census proposed a "Hispanic/Spanish origin" category to ward off pressure by activist groups and to count more accurately next time around; the fledgling National Council of La Raza, originally a regional pressure group of Mexican-Americans in the American South West, readily adopted a panethnic Hispanic identification, which now included Puerto Ricans and Cubans, "so that it could obtain more grants and resources" (p. 15); and Univision, the first nationwide Hispanic television channel, promoted the panethnic category because it increased the size of its market and thus potential revenues from advertisers. All wanted different things but they coalesced to produce the same outcome, "Hispanics".

In what, I concur, is a "model and masterpiece of institutional analysis" (Mora's Princeton advisor, Paul DiMaggio, endorsing the book), two factors are held responsible for this outcome: first, "collaboration across fields" (now it is several), and, secondly, the "ambiguity" of the panethnic label. With respect to the first, Mora observes that "by 1990, media executives would routinely ask activists or census officials to appear on news segments and public affairs programs about Hispanic panethnicity" (p.xiii). Similar cooperation-flagging vignettes could be provided for the "activists" and the "census officials" in this constellation. While initially there was conflict, in particular between bureaucrats and activists (La Raza's roots, after all, are in the radical Chicano movement of the late 1960s), it quickly gave way to collaboration and a sense of mutual dependence. Networks emerged of people moving between all three segments of the field (it really is only one), one-time government appointees morphing into activist counselors morphing into media entrepreneurs. As one of them told the author (who is never short of a catchy and original quote to bring home a point): "We all came to know each other [… the] world of Hispanic leaders was small […] we could call one another up easily" (p. 156).

Take away "Hispanic leaders", and you might think this is a description of French politics (where the filling of important positions in state, corporations, and public life is a game of musical chairs among ENA alumni, so-called *énarques*, except that there is no shortage of chairs). But here it is democracy in action, where previous underdogs obtain a seat at the table, and where the state is not a bulwark of privilege (as it is in France, no less when so-called "Socialists" are in charge, their current leader-cum-president, of course, being an *énarque*). Instead, here the state is but one part of a network whose true site is civil society. Which raises an interesting point: is not what is presented here—by

way of cutting-edge organizational sociology ("stakeholders", "fields", "networks", etc.)—as an exchangeable instance of socio-political conflict in truth a very American story that would not be possible in the ossified state-societies of Europe, where the state is anything but flat and pluralistic?

Further on this point, the opening salvo in the making of Hispanics, which is otherwise presented as a story of horizontal relationships among a plurality of actors, without any prime mover, still comes from the democratic state. In the late 1960s, responding, of course, to the civil rights struggles of the time, it was the federal government, under the (Republican) Nixon presidency, but in a process that had started under the preceding (Democratic) Johnson presidency, which created the Cabinet Committee on Opportunities for Spanish Speaking People (CCOSSP)—the very first organization to carry a pan-ethnic name! The purpose was plainly electoral, to "turn Mexican American and Puerto Rican protests into political opportunities" (p. 17). Johnson is quoted as howling at a Mexican-American delegation, "Keep this trash out of the White House" (p. 24). But the interest, which transcended party lines, in "securing the Spanish-speaking vote" (p. 18) proved stronger. It paid off. Nixon managed to increase the "Spanish-speaking" vote five-fold, from 7 percent in 1968 to 35 percent in the 1972 presidential elections (p. 43). If slight criticism of Mora's stellar book is allowed, it is that her "bureaucrat-activist-media" triangle omits the crucial importance of this fourth (or rather first) actor in the genesis of Hispanics: the vote-catching political entrepreneur in the democratic state. It makes this an even more specifically *American* story than it would otherwise be (the European democratic state is buffered by bureaucracy, in particular by party bureaucracy, as well as by more exclusive citizenship laws, from the full force of the elementary democratic mechanism).

Next to "collaboration across fields" (it really should read, I think, though less elegantly, "collaboration within one field by different kinds of actors"), the "ambiguity" of the pan-ethnic marker is the second key element in Mora's story. No one could and would say what the content of "Hispanic" exactly was. "Language", an obvious and often used possibility, could not be the gist of it, because second- and third-generation immigrants often no longer speak Spanish. A legacy of colonialism and oppression by Anglos, the heart of the radical Mexican-American Chicano identity, made no sense for privileged middle-class Cubans who had an issue not with WASPs but with Castro. In fact, the term "Hispanic" was despised by some for its

linguistic association with Spanish-European colonialism, and they preferred (and still prefer) the more correct "Latino" label (including the author herself, p. xiv). Importantly, to stay clear of this rift, the various actors involved in the making of Hispanics made at best vague references to a "common Hispanic culture" (of which the Spanish language, of course, was always an important part) (p. 48), and they mostly avoided the divisive colonialism topic in favor of defining Hispanics as "hardworking, religious, and family-focused"—qualities that "could have been applied to any group" (p. 5). To leave the content of Hispanic ambiguous proved the pan-ethnic marker to be merely "a means to an end" that could be bent in many directions: Hispanics were a "disadvantaged and underrepresented minority group" for the activists in search of federal grants (p. 5); they were an "up-and-coming national consumer market" for media executives eager to increase advertising revenues (p. 6); and they were just a "certain educational, income, and fertility pattern" for the census officials whose main interest was in "statistical correlation" (p. 13). However, as the network evolved, these frames were fungible or modular. That is, they could be borrowed and adapted by other actors of the same network: media executives would play the minority card to get licensing privileges from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and activists would play the "Hispanic market" card to lure corporate sponsors (a vital necessity after the incoming Reagan administration dramatically axed federal funds in the early 1980s). "Stakeholders learned to appropriate frames from one another", Mora summarizes the process (p.156).

However, not anything goes. "Ambiguity" was kept in check by "analogy", which is another of the very few and parsimoniously deployed entries from the lexicon of organizational theory. It means that, in the end, Hispanics were "like blacks" (a disadvantaged minority), not least for census officials who, post-1980, would routinely compare Hispanic-origin data with those of "non-Hispanic whites" and "non-Hispanic blacks" (p. 115). One should know that, notably not to deplete the other minority "races" (p. 101), the first "Hispanic" category in the 1980 census was officially an "ethnic" (not "racial") category, which co-existed with (i.e., was asked in addition to) the official race question. Accordingly, Hispanics could officially be of "any race". But Hispanic was still seen as "analogous" to race. This delimited the inherent ambiguity of the Hispanic category and worked to "construct a barrier between categories" (p. 158).

"Hispanic" thus evolved not as the identifiable product of a first mover but of a relational field. It is no wonder that the origins of the new category became immediately obscured. "A sort of collective amnesia sets in", Mora concludes her impressive account, as if the category had "always existed" (p. 159). Once the category was out, by the actors and processes authoritatively documented in *Making Hispanics*, it consolidated through "organizational diffusion", via academics surveying and writing about "Hispanics", political parties eager to catch the "Hispanic vote", and—last but not least—the demographic force of new Latin American immigration, mixed marriages, etc.

In the end, the bottom line of Hispanic is racial—which is puzzling to the European eye that is not used to "race" as official legal-political category. It is but consequential that the US Census Bureau is at present contemplating folding the current dualism of the (pseudo)-ethnic "Hispanic origin" question and still separate race categories ("white", "black", "Asian", and "native American") into *one* single race question. In that way, "Hispanic" would simply be added to the current quadruple to complete what has long been known as the "ethno-racial pentagon"[3]. Ironically, this would send America back to 1930, the one and only time that "Mexican" was explicitly a race category in the census. However, at that time, it (rightly) came to be rejected by the population thus designated (who were no longer "white") as the racist affront that it was meant to be.[4] But the world has changed in the meantime. In the post-civil-rights era, "race" is less a stigma than an opportunity (concretely, affirmative action privileges). To the degree that "Hispanics" are analogous to blacks (and other racial minorities), it is anachronistic for (and factually rejected by many) Hispanics to also consider themselves "white", "black", "Asian", or "native American", as the censuses so far have asked them to. This bears the risk of "incorrectly framing Hispanics as a homogenous community with little internal variation", advises Mora (p. 168). But, this is the important and irrefutable take-away message of *Making Hispanics*, "there are no true or false identities, for each is the product of a socio-historical process" (p. 169).

To this reviewer (who never took a class in organizational sociology), there is another take-away message. *Making Hispanics* shows the power of organizational sociology as a kind of meta-sociology to provide the

[3] David Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, New York: Basic Books 1995.

[4] See Jennifer Hochschild and Brenna Powell, "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census 1850-1930", *Studies in American Political Development* 22 (1), 2008, 59-96.

theoretical core for a deplorably fragmenting and intellectually atrophying discipline. Others would have framed the topic of this book: ethnic and racial classification, differently—as one of social movements, of the state (within the ambit of "political sociology"), or, most obviously, of ethnicity and race. However, this has so far only yielded the one-sided, if not misleading ("villain" vs. "hero") pictures that are the point of departure for this book. All the author needs to build her more complete story is fewer than a handful of very elementary (though cutting-edge and optimally deployed) concepts of organization theory ("field", "network", "ambiguity", "analogy").[5] No more is needed, except of course the exceptional talent of a Cristina Mora, to produce this (almost) perfect work of sociology.

That exceptional talent, it should be mentioned at the end, is herself the child of Mexican immigrants, whose father did not make it "past grammar school" (p.xix). His daughter saw the halls of Berkeley, Princeton, Chicago, only to return for a first teaching job to Berkeley (and I bet she had a choice). Her "acknowledgements" mention some of the finest in American sociology (more than your aging reviewer ever met). America needs winners, and here is one. *She* did not need it, but the Hispanic pan-ethnicity described in her book probably did not hurt either. Would a review of the brilliant first book by a rising star of second-generation Muslim vintage, graduating from Cambridge and just hired by Sciences Po, coolly and disengagedly dissecting the story of her own group, be thinkable in Europe? Cristina Mora's is an American story twice over, which should be heeded in a Europe that, to paraphrase LBJ, still prefers to "trash" its immigrants.

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[5] See the crisp theoretical synopsis of her book, Cristina Mora, "Cross-Field Effects and Ethnic Classification", *American Sociological Review* 79 (2), 2014, 183-210.